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Director: James Solheim
jsolheim@episcopalchurch.org

Deputy Director: The Rev. Jan
Nunley
jnunley@episcopalchurch.org

Communications Assistant:
Daphne Mack
dmack@episcopalchurch.org

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Episcopalians among religious progressives to launch new coalition

by Jan Nunley

(ENS) Galvanized by the outcome of the 2000 presidential election, and appealing to the memory of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., more than 250 leaders of faith-based groups launched a new Progressive Religious Partnership (PRP) at a three-day conference in Washington, D.C. on April 4-6.

With the theme, "Remembering Dr. King, Reclaiming the Beloved Community, Advancing a Progressive Religious Agenda," the group decried what it called "a famine of faithful witness to God of justice and compassion, the God of Israel and Jesus. We have suffered what the great prophet Amos called a 'famine of the hearing the word of God' "in the last three decades of American political discourse.

"Now is the time for large numbers of religious leaders to join in an organized effort to offer people bread instead of stone," declared the group in a founding statement entitled "A Call for Faithful Witnesses." "Now it is time to lift high the banner of prophetic witness and to restore a progressive religious presence to its rightful place in the public square. *We seek to put a progressive religious voice back into the national dialogue about morality and politics, to build a network of various progressive religious movements, and to create plans of action that contribute to greater justice and more inclusive community.*"

Alternative religious viewpoint

"We don't want to demonize" the Religious Right

we don't want to demonize the Religious Right said Rabbi Steven Jacobs of Temple Kol Tikvah in Los Angeles, but to challenge the assumption that conservatives offer the only religiously-based viewpoint on public issues.

But that doesn't mean they're unwilling to step on toes. "There's a new recognition that the Gospel is being bought and sold, cut up and undermined," added the Rev. James Lawson Jr., pastor emeritus of Holman United Methodist Church in Los Angeles, an associate of King and one of the architects of the Civil Rights Movement. "I sense a recognition that the Religious Right funds a theocratic, fascist movement that emanates out of racism, sexism and violence."

According to the Rev. Robert Edgar, general secretary of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, the launching of the PRP represents a new level of collaboration among progressive groups, both religious and secular. "The Holy Spirit is moving among us with ego disarmament," Edgar chuckled, adding that organizing progressives is far easier in a Bush administration than it was during the eight years of the Clinton presidency.

Episcopalian presence strong

Episcopalians were prominent among the speakers and workshop leaders at the conference. The Rev. George Regas, president of the Regas Institute, was one of the initiators of the coalition.

"We began looking for ways to get the progressive voice back in the dialogue, but that voice has to be rooted in the sacred story," Regas said in an interview. But by the same token, he said, too many progressives had "severed the link between economic and sexual justice."

"We will not sacrifice one agenda for the sake of the other," Regas declared.

The Regas Institute co-hosted the conference with the People for the American Way Foundation (PFAW), which Regas praised for being "smart enough" to know that a partnership with people of faith would be "hugely beneficial" to the things PFAW cares about.

Other Episcopalian progressives at the conference

included the Rev. Katherine Ragsdale, chair of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC), who led a workshop on reproductive rights as a moral position; the Rev. William Rankin, president of the newly-formed Global AIDS Interfaith Alliance (GAIA), whose workshop explored the global challenge of AIDS; and the Rev. James Adams, president of the Center for Progressive Christianity (CPC), who spoke on "religion that cares about people who find organized religion ineffective and repressive."

Progressive church growth

Regas' successor at All Saints' Episcopal Church in Pasadena, California, the Rev. Ed Bacon, led a workshop on "Building Progressive Congregations--Mobilization for the Human Family." Bacon spoke of growing progressive churches as those which are "relevant, energized, and energizing."

"You cannot be progressive if you don't have your vision set on the common good," Bacon told the group. "It is not enough just to take care of people who look like you." At All Saints', Bacon said, people come "with the church gathered to be transformed, so that when you are the church scattered, you are transforming the world. It's an 'oscillation of transformation'." Worshipers proceed from the Eucharistic table to "action tables," where they sign up for ministries, sign petitions, or otherwise "connect ...to the tables that you live at the rest of the week: the dining table, the kitchen table, the operating room table, the table in the classroom or the table at the boardroom."

"The church must never be neutral," said Bacon. "It must stand in favor of the core values of God Almighty." Those core values include being a "grown-up church" that's not afraid to talk about politics, sex, or money. "People do not want religion that is worried about the wrinkles in the linens and whether the acolyte team has on tennis shoes or not," he declared. "They want to be a part of making the world better."

Moral authority needed

Brushing aside critics who maintain that politics and spirituality don't mix, plenary speakers took on

everything from the federal budget and tax cuts to sexual and gender justice.

"I hope everyone can accept the principle that the tax cuts and budget debates are faith and community issues," said Wade Henderson, executive director of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights. "We need your moral authority to win this debate. If you're not working in coalition with other denominations and other groups, we're going to lose."

Marian Wright Edelman, founder and president of the [Children's Defense Fund](#), told the group that during the presidential campaign Bush "chose to take the trademarked mission statement of the Children's Defense Fund. So we are going to define for him what it means to 'Leave No Child Behind.'"

"The rich folk are just going to have to wait on another tax cut until the hungry are fed, until we have no more children hungry and homeless and learning in crumbling schools," Edelman declared. "If we don't build a movement now to say 'no'--then shame on us...Our job is to change what's possible."

Other conference workshops included sessions on charitable choice, a death penalty moratorium, ecological spirituality, the 2000 election, reproductive rights, same sex unions, AIDS, missile defense and economic justice.

'Good religion loves everybody'

The three-day conference was held on the 33rd anniversary of King's assassination. At the opening rally, the Rev. Charles G. Adams, pastor of Detroit's Hartford Memorial Baptist Church, preached to a crowd of about 400 from the pulpit of Washington's 163-year-old Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church.

"There's a whole lot of dangerous, bad, sick religion in the world. Bad religion makes you hate folks; good religion loves everybody," said Adams, who first worked with King in 1957. "Let us go forward together. Let us turn the world upside down and turn it right-side-up in the name of justice."

--The Rev. Jan Nunley is deputy director of the Office of News and Information for the Episcopal

Church.

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